

Star Trek: Achilles Heel

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Summary: A new crew with strange new mission, unfinished

Star Trek: Achilles Heel

Body

Star Trek: Achilles Heel

Stranded

Part One of a Trilogy

By Blair Ryan

The characters in this story are purely fiction. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is pure coincidence.

Prologue

BLEEEEEEP! BLEEEEEEP! BLEEEEEEP!

The red alert klaxons screamed over the comm. system.

"Status!" Commander Ashley Johnson asked as she stumbled out of her ready room.

"Three Jem'Hadar warships just came out of warp 30,000 meters off the port bow," Lieutenant Drake announced from his security console.

"They just opened fire."

"Shields up!" Lieutenant-Commander Steinvorth, the ship's first officer, ordered quickly.

"Return fire," the commander ordered.

On the view screen the bridge crew saw three quantum torpedoes blast out from their ship and hit two of the three Jem'Hadar, but it flew

past the third.

"Heavy damage to the first ship, but the second suffered no damage," the first officer informed Commander Johnson.

"Commander, the second and third ship are returning fire!" Drake announced.

"Take evasive maneuvers!" Johnson ordered before the impact could throw her to the deck.

The ship rocked under the blasts. Power conduits exploded as energy surges flew threw the bridge. The blue plasma would have injured Johnson had she been sitting in her chair, but luckily, she wasn't one to spend much time in her own captain's chair, being up and about was less confining. She pulled herself to her feet.

"Return fire, quantum torpedoes, full spread," Johnson ordered immediately.

The bright red orbs of antimatter erupted from the starboard hull and exploded against the three ships. The lead ship exploded, the shock-wave pushed the nearest ship out of the range of three more torpedoes. The undamaged ship returned fire.

The blast cut through the nearly nonexistent shields like a hot knife through butter. There was no time to brace for impact and Steinvorth was thrown against the bulkhead. If not for her half Vulcan blood, she would not have had the strength to stop her from breaking her ribs against the wall.

"Heavy damage on decks Five through Nine!" Lieutenant Horton announced from his engineering station. "Sir! We've lost sickbay!"

"Lieutenant, get your damage control teams assembled and see what you can do!" Johnson ordered.

"See if you can salvage anything from cargo bay six, we might need the weapons stored there if we are boarded!" Steinvorth yelled to the ops officer as he exited the bridge.

"Yes sir," the operations officer said as he headed for the turbolift. He tapped his comm. badge and ordered Ensign Temple and Ensign Barrow to meet him on deck seven.

"Prepare another spread of torpedoes," Commander Johnson ordered.

"Sir, we don't have torpedoes, the launch tubes were fused in the last blast," Drake informed her, furiously tapping his console trying to get a response from the fried systems.

"Then fire full phasers!" Johnson almost yelled. _God, soon all that will be left of the ship will be the torpedo launchers. _Johnson thought annoyed.

The red beams lanced out with a powerful impact. Small fires burned on the hull until they could find no more oxygen and died out.

"Sir, direct hit! That last hit caused heavy damage. The second ship's deflectors are at 7 percent," her first officer informed her.

"What about the third?" Johnson asked.

"They have 50 percent deflectors, it looks like their weapons are down. They don't pose a threat to us," Drake assured her reading from his console.

"Ensign Williams, hail the lead ship," the Commander ordered.

"Jem'Hadar ships, I am Commander Ashley Johnson of the Federation Starship Lenin. Surrender and prepare to be boarded," Johnson said praying that there was one sane person on the ship that was willing to surrender without a fight.

"Sir, they're not responding," Ensign Williams informed them.

"Well, get ready for a boar-" Johnson started, but was cut off by Drake's alarmed voice.

"Sir, the second ship is powering weapons!" Drake yelled.

"Give the shields all we've got and fire phasers!" Commander Johnson ordered.

It was too late though. The phased Polaron beam lanced out of the Jem'Hadar warship's weapons array. Just moments later, the phasers hit and the ship exploded into a massive ball of flame taking its companion ship with it.

But the celebration was short-lived. Half a second later the polaron beam smashed into the primary hull of the Lenin, causing ship-wide explosions. The ship heaved under her feet, throwing Johnson to the ground. She got up to see three bridge consoles exploded behind her.

"Ahhh!" Johnson turned just in time to see Lieutenant Drake engulfed in flame. The fire-suppression system quickly extinguished the blaze, but it was much too late. Johnson regretfully realized there was no way they could save him.

Ensign Williams ran over to his scorched body to check his condition. "He's dead," she said as her hand moved from his neck. She was young, everyone on the ship was, but she had not experienced death firsthand like this. It would be a tough lesson to learn.

Johnson almost wept for him. She had watched the young lieutenant grow up from a wet, naive young ensign, to a promising security chief. She would have to go see Drake's family when she got back to earth. _If_ she got back to earth.

"Damage report," she called out to anyone with an operational console.

"We've lost all but minimal life support on decks two through thirteen. We have no weapons, no shields, and we have a hull breach

on deck fifteen. Emergency force-fields have sealed off the deck. Casualty lists are coming in from all over the ship. So far we have twenty-nine dead, eighty-three wounded," Her first officer informed her of the grim news. Luckily the Akira Class starships were equipped with emergency support control panels built into the bulkheads. The ship would be lost if there was no way to assess the damage done by the attack, as was the case in other Starfleet vessels.

"Ensign Williams."

"Yes sir?" Ensign Williams replied from her barely functional, flickering control station.

"Send can you send out a distress signal?," Johnson asked the shaken comm. officer.

"Yes sir."

"Than do it, try to mask it's carrier waive to Dominion ships," Johnson ordered.

Johnson tapped her comm. badge. "All senior staff in non-serious conditions, meet in the conference room in ten minutes, we've got to figure out a way to keep life support functional."

"What are we going to do?" She mumbled to herself, she wasn't a first year cadet, she knew that there wasn't a lot of hope of them getting through the day. The ship's systems were in turmoil, and her crew were as ragged as they come, how could they possibly get through this?

She looked at her bridge, or what used to be her bridge. Ceiling panels were hanging down all around her. Five of the six department consoles were destroyed. Lieutenant Ragsdale, the ship's pilot, was laying on the ground bloody. Drake was dead. She wondered how the conference room was holding together. Well, there was one way to find out. She headed off to see what had become of her once proud ship.

* * *

Johnson paced back and forth inside her ready room. They were forced to use it, for the conference room had been reduced to particles in the attack. She watched her senior staff as they sat down, noticing their poor circumstances, and a few absences. Horton had a splint on his arm, Ragsdale had a bandage on his head, Williams had a burn from when her console had just exploded, and then there was the fact that the Doctor, and Chief Engineer were absent. Lt. Bullock was the only one who didn't look hurt. The nearly two and a half meter tall science officer had escaped harm somehow.

"What are your department status'?" Johnson asked.

Horton started, "The chief engineer is dead, Ensigns Temple and Barrow are seriously injured from plasma burns, they probably won't survive the hour. The ship has barely any breathable atmosphere, I'd say we have four hours before we lose life support completely."

"You Lieutenant?" Johnson asked nodding towards Ragsdale.

"We've lost warp, and we are running on thrusters only. And we don't

even have enough power for that. We need all the energy reserves we have for life support."

"And you ensign?" she said pointing to Jolley.

"We have short range sensors and that's about it," he responded quietly. He didn't sound too optimistic.

"Well, this isn't showing to much promise. How about you, ensign Williams?"

"We still have communication. The Bozeman responded and will be here within three hours," She was trying to make herself smile, help morale. Hopefully it would work.

"Now that's news to look forward to," the Commander said enthusiastically. It lightened the others' moods even more.

"Do everything you can to keep life-support operational," Johnson told Lieutenant Horton. "And the rest of you attend to your duties."

"Aye, sir," they all said.

"Dismissed."

All of the command crew got up and left except for Johnson's first officer. "It's amazing what this crew can do in a time of crisis, isn't it?"

"There was no doubt in my mind that this crew could pull through," She said almost reflexively.

"Well, it surprised me. I almost wasn't sure we were going to make it," Johnson's first officer was quite a fan of the crew's "newfound" abilities. The Vulcan side of her still had the idea that humans were primitive and not capable of surviving extreme circumstances.

"Well, we're Starfleet. No-one can beat Starfleet's spirit," Johnson said like she was reading it from a book. In her year of ship's command, she had taken great pride in her crew. And in her young age, only 28, she had a little too much pride at times. Maybe an overestimation did good, at times though.

There was a large debate in Starfleet Command. Since the beginning of the Dominion war, the ages of officers had gone down and down. Officers in their mid and late twenties were not uncommon anymore. But, Picards were not often seen anymore. Some thought that this was going to bring an end to Starfleet by having inexperienced officers running warships, but it was a losing battle, there were no replacements.

At any rate, the youth allowed for high spirit, and great pride, and when talking about her crew, Johnson had no shortage of either.

"Oh, come on Ashley, one more shot and we would've been finished. This crew did an amazing job, you can't deny it. We're lucky," Steinvorth argued.

"Your right Erika, we were lucky, but what about Drake or Chief Nielson? They weren't that lucky," Johnson reminded her longtime friend. She was feeling guilt roll over her when mentioning the dead. She felt completely responsible for those that had died.

"This crew is Starfleet and that's what we were trained for. They know the risks as well as me and you. You can blame no one but the Dominion for their deaths. So let's be happy to be alive. That's all that we need to do." She knew that her longtime friend, and first officer, was right.

"You're right, now let's get busy. I'm sure we can help somehow. There's plenty to be done." the captain said changing the subject.

"Yes, sir!" the first officer said saluting with a smile on her face. Definitely not very vulcanlike.

Johnson's first officer and friend left the turmoil that had once been the "captain's" ready room. She looked around at the pieces of her furniture, and her broken antique mountain climbing gear from 2015. She knew that even if they got out of this, the ship would not make it to the refitting yards. She had served on the Lenin for three years, since she was the first officer. And when the Captain was killed in the Borg incursion, she took over, and now she was going to have to give it up. She left the ready room thinking the worst had to be over, or at least, praying it was.

"How soon will the Bozeman arrive?" Johnson asked when she stepped onto the bridge. She sat down for the first time since before the attack.

"The last message says they will be here within two hours," Ensign Williams answered.

"That's good," she said enthusiastically. "Lt. Horton," she said tapping her comm. badge.

"Yes sir?"

"How is it coming down there?" She asked hoping for good news.

"We've sealed the breach on deck 15. We'll have full life support on every one of the 17 decks within the hour," He sounded pleased with his answers.

"Thank you mister Horton, I think your looking for a promotion if you keep doing this miracle work," she said meaning it. Any good news felt like it lifted 20 kilos off of her stress sore back.

"Horton out," he said on the other end of the line, probably grinning his head off about the high praise from the Commanding Officer.

Erika is right, she thought. This crew is amazing. _Just a half an hour ago, it didn't look like we could make it. Now we're capable of surviving for hours without assistance. _But now it was time for the bad news.

"Lieutenant Bullock?" the Commander asked.

"Yes sir."

"Do you have the latest casualty report?" Johnson asked dreading the response.

"Yes sir, I do," He said walking over and handing her the PADD, not allowing her to stand up. It was bad enough that she had to read it, but she was now made to sit and read it. This was one nightmare after another.

"Here I go," she said reluctantly. She wasn't prepared to see the names of the deceased, people who died under her command. People she knew she would personally give their families the news, how their sons and daughters had died because she made a wrong decision. _No, I'm not going to think that way. They knew as well as I that Starfleet was a risky business, especially now that the war was in full force_, she thought, losing the battle with her guilt.

She finally decided to look. Some of her crew that were dead were, Drake, Temple, Barrow, Chief Nielson, then she saw something that caught her eye. The doctor was dead.

"Lieutenant, who's helping the wounded if Dr. Richards is dead?" She asked the Science Officer.

"Lt. Commander Evans, or should I say, Dr. Evans. She was off duty so she didn't get killed when sickbay exploded. She and the surviving nurse have set up a triage facility in cargo bay Five," Bullock informed her.

"Oh," she said and looked back at her PADD.

She looked over the list and then she saw something that nearly made her run off of the bridge. She stood up and headed toward the turbolift. She felt her insides wrench. _This cannot be happening!_ she thought. _It can't!_

__ "Commander Steinvorth, you have the bridge!" She barely remembered to say that before the turbolift swept her away, it was one of the things her mind didn't have much room for, not in her state of turmoil.

"Ash-Sir what is-" but it was too late. The turbolift doors shut and she was gone.

"What was that about?" Bullock asked the commander.

Steinvorth walked over to the seldom used captain's chair to see what was on the PADD. What she saw made her half green blood run cold. "I think I know, but I hope I'm not correct," she sighted, "I really hope not."

* * *

Johnson was panting when she stepped into cargo bay 5. She had run 200 meters to get there.

"Hello sir," Dr. Evans greeted politely. She knew why the Commander

was here, and really wished it wasn't her who was here when it happened. No doctor wanted to be on duty while their superior lost a loved one.

She didn't return the greeting. "Where is Lieutenant-Commander Erickson?"

"Oh, yes," she paused for a second, "He's over there," she said softly. She pointed to a group of emergency cots.

"Ashley..." Lt. Commander Alec Erickson muttered when he saw her.

"Honey, what happened to you?" She asked him almost breaking into tears. How could this be happening? It was bad enough that this attack had happened in the first place, she had to keep an emotional boundary, but this, this was far beyond boundaries. She could not keep away, spare herself this pain. And more, she didn't want to let herself be spared. She wanted to be guilty and take all responsibility.

"I.. I was standing next to a plasma conduit when it exploded. I've been exposed to intense radiation. I'm not going to survive until the Defiant gets here," his voice was getting labored. The raspy voice brought an emotional feeling that Johnson never wanted to feel again.

She knew he was right. The radiation was shutting down his body. But that didn't mean she had to believe it. She would keep fighting. Stay with him until the last minute.

"Don't talk like that, you're going to survive! And think, in a month we'll be walking down the aisle," she couldn't help but cry. "We'll... We'll have our friends, our family, everyone is going to be there. It's..." she couldn't talk anymore. She burst into all out tears. Her choked sobs concerned her fiancé more than his condition.

"Hush. Hush," He said trying to comfort her. She was ashamed of herself. Her lover was lying on a cot with massive burns all over his body, he was clearly in pain, and all she could think about was herself. How she would feel after losing him.

He was staring up at her and then he started convulsing.

"Doctor!" She yelled out.

"I... love... you," he muttered with obvious pain. But then his pain was over. His seizures came to an end. His burns hurt him no longer. He was dead.

"I love you too," she whispered.

She had been sitting down beside her fiancé, and tried to sit up, but now she couldn't even find the strength. She collapsed beside him and cried. Her tears stung her cheeks like acid, she could no longer think of anything but how much she would miss him, her fiancé, her lover. How could she deal with the responsibilities of being ship's commander when she couldn't even deal with this. A simple death, one member of the crew, one. But if it was so simple, why did it eat her

up inside? Why was she considering resigning? In a way, she felt like a piece of herself had died. She had no idea what she was going to do, but she knew whatever it was, it would not be an easy decision.

"I'm sorry," Dr. Evans said sadly as she arrived, too late.

"I am too," she muttered. "I am too."

Chapter I

Ashley sat on the balcony of her Maryland home. Like most days, she thought about the battle five months before. The images floated through her mind, and the images were usually faces of the dead. Drake, Nielson, Temple, but mostly of Alec. Her near-spouse was nearly a constant in the turmoil of her mind. She remembered everything about him. His smile, his laugh, how he kissed her.

Many days ago, she began thinking about when they met, and it had been to repeat nearly continuously. The illusion wasn't just there, Ashley knew, but she willed it to be there. She didn't want the illusions to end. In her mind, the illusions were the only thing that had meaning in her life anymore. The real world was the illusion. The illusions had become a constant that she did not want to stop, even if it was possible anymore.

It always began the same. U.S.S. Capricorn was in orbit around the planet Xirckez Prime, a beautiful M class planet with lush rain forests, expansive oceans with an amazing array of plant and animal life, but what drew Ensign Johnson was the mountains. There was 300 meter vertical cliffs, craggy peaks, and one of the best non-antigrav climbing tournaments in the quadrant. And it was the infamous tournament that drew the young ensign in. Because of nacelle problems, the Capricorn was laid over for ten days. Seventy-five percent of the crew were approved for shore leave and Johnson was one of them.

As soon as Ashley beamed into the town of De'quen she saw the mountain and knew there was nothing that could stop her from taking the challenge the mountain range waived in her face. She would have to climb it, no matter what the locals said about outsiders never finishing the tournament. That probably made it even more tempting, how everyone said the "soft" humans always dropped out of the games, most the time literally. But she was convinced, she was much more skilled than the rest who tried. She would triumph, she had Starfleet spirit on her side.

When Johnson went to sign up, more than one of the clerks in charge of reservations told her to go find something else to do on the planet, suggesting the anti-grav water skiing. After talking to three clerks, she found someone with enough sense to let her enter, but even the good-spirited volunteer had his doubts at seeing the petite, small boned woman sign up for one of the most grueling challenges on the planet.

Johnson was there at the start of the games, she was ready at 0430 to get her supplies checked and rechecked. She never fell behind the "true" competitors. She nearly was certain that she would lose, but just the thought of those stuck up clerks at the base made her blood boil like a Klingon. It was like she had to enter this contest for

her pride, even though she started out entering it for the thrills of actually climbing the magnificent peaks.

When one of the judges hit the huge tritanium bell to signal the beginning of the climb, she was up already on her way up the mountain keeping great pace with the professionals. She made it up the vertical climb area within minutes. Only behind a huge burly native who had probably done it many time before. She began onto the no gear zone, where she had to grab the rock face with her bare hands. In this she had her advantage. A human's small hands were able to fit in spaces the Xenez's could not. Instead of having to carefully grab the most out of the way handhold so she could fit her digits into it, she was able to hold nearly every space available. This was a major advantage, but it was also the thing that nearly got her killed.

She scrambled up the rockface, barely paying attention to where she was grabbing for support, all she could see was how far ahead of her competitors she was getting. She didn't notice when she grabbed something that wasn't there. When she finally did notice, she was already falling face first. Falling into the abyss of the planet. She remembered the moment of pure fear, a fear that she had no realization of at the time. It was too great a fear to imagine, to one who has never experienced it. In the brief moment, she did not see her life before her eyes, but see saw a glimpse of a future she had never imagined.

Ashley was startled awake from her dream by what she saw. She had not thought of what she glimpsed in that brief moment five years ago. And in her hallucinations she had experienced many, many times, she had not thought of what she saw in those flashes of semi-consciousness.

She let the illusion sweep over again, seeing the images in her mind that she created for the images' sake, if not because it was what he had always wanted.

She saw flashes of herself, in years to come. She didn't know that it was what she was to become at the time. All she knew was it looked strange. She was dressed in a strange uniform. Black patches on the arms and legs, with a red torso. Strange, Starfleet hadn't had anything like it in many years, she wasn't sure if Starfleet had ever borne anything like it.

She saw herself and other people, only they were not at peace, laughing or happy, they were shooting, screaming, at something, something ugly and strange. Something dark, something she didn't want to remember.

She was wrenched out of the hallucination inside a hallucination. She saw the ground rushing to her, getting ready to claim her life, when she felt a hand grab her. It was a strong hand, holding onto her jumpsuit for dear life. She looked up to see a man looking down at her. He was very handsome, and definitely strong, to have caught her. Looking past him, as hard as it was because she was mesmerized by his handsome face, but she saw that she had plunged almost 50 meters. That length would have reduced her to a small phaser burn.

"Uh, hi," she said confused at what she could possibly say to the man who had just saved her life.

"Hi," he said equally confused. They both stared into each other's eyes, drinking up their souls, trying to discover what made them tick.

"Uh, your arm, it is probably getting tired, huh?"

They started laughing. Johnson didn't know why, but they both started laughing. They laughed until the climb engineer came and picked them up in his anti-grav sled. After they stopped laughing they just stared for a while into each other's eyes. They both knew they were destined to be together.

Ashley cried. Tears poured onto her cheeks, cheeks barely dry from the last crying fit. _Why?_ Ashley thought. _Why am I continuing to live this life like this?_ The last illusion had been more stinging than ever. The images she had forgotten had stirred feelings of hate and sadness, when they had once done exactly the opposite.

She thought about the balcony now. Realizing the cliffs and the crashing waves. She wanted to end it all. To keep the pain away by ending all pain. She walked to the edge of her balcony, her pain, thinking, _Yes, I will end it all, it will never bother me, or anyone else again._ She poised herself to jump, to make the final move when she heard a voice.

"Ashley, what are you doing?" Came the voice of her beautiful friend, and one-time first officer. She was leaning gracefully against the door frame. Stretched out like a cat, she would have made any man faint at her sight, but it reminded Ashley of a time long ago, when she'd never experience the pain of loss. A better time.

"Nothing for you to be concerned about," she said coldly, her friend could not interfere with this, it was meant to happen, she would have to rid herself of this miserable existence, an existence she helped create.

"Ashley, I have spacedock standing by. They have a transporter lock on you. If you tried to jump they would beam you up before you fell half the way. I don't want to do it, but I will if I have to. And trust me, in your skimpy pajamas, I would think you'd be more than a little embarrassed to be seen in front of spacedock personnel," She joked, but partially serious, Ashley's nightgown was barely a nightgown, just a see through top and short dress over her bra. She wasn't exactly expecting to be seen in front of a bunch of Starfleet personnel. She stepped down. She was partially relieved, she hadn't wanted to kill herself, not that much anyway, and seeing her friend made her realize that.

"I wouldn't be talking about dress code right now. Look at what you're wearing. I really hope you're not on duty right now," Ashley said pointing out her friend's very... interesting choice of dress. She was wearing a very tight leather top and miniskirt. It was very formfitting to say the least.

Ashley was aware of her friend's promiscuous nature. Even though her friend was only half-Vulcan, she didn't act at all like her heritage commanded. She was the farthest anyone could go from acting like a Vulcan. Ashley had met men and women with only fourth Vulcan blood and still acted more Vulcan than Erika Steinorth. She didn't want to say her friend slept around, but she had graced more than several...

dozen men with her presence at night back on the Lenin. Ashley didn't know if it was rebellious, or just fun for her friend, but she knew it happened quite often, and she wondered why Erika was in Maryland, when she could be in New York or some other place made for partying and a good time.

Erika smile, "These little things? These are just my play clothes, I was off duty and decided to come see you," She stretched out like a cat, mocking. But then she frowned, "I thought you would go back to work when you're leave was up. I talked to Admiral Mienuea today. She wanted to know if I had talked to you. We had a little more to talk about, something that you need to hear," she said seriously.

"What could Admiral Mienuea want with me? I am just a little piece of matter, a waist of matter at that. Just a commander who couldn't take it any more," Ashley said losing her temper, she wasn't in the mood for Starfleet.

"Ashley, you know that's not true. You are cut from the same clothe as the greats, Kirk, Picard, Pike, you are one of the best Starfleet has to offer. Don't make that seem untrue. Please, as a friend, I ask that you don't sell yourself short," Erika sighed heavily, knowing how hard what she was about to say would be for her friend. "Ashley, I want you to come with me right now. I want you to go get dressed, and beam up with me to Spacedock. I was going to try to explain this to you, but this will be better."

Ashley was shocked, What does she take me for? she thought. Why would I abandon... The realization came to her. She would not be abandoning anything but hate and pain. The hate for herself, she could rid herself of that. And she would not only be helping herself, but Alec's memory also. Instead of spending her life in this pitiful illusion-filled world, she would be living it again.

"Okay, I'll go get dressed," Ashley said amazing Erika and herself. She had sent away countless old crew members and friends who tried to help get Ashley's life back together, and all it had taken was five minutes with her old first officer and she was ready to agree to almost anything.

Wish some of the men I meet were this submissive, Erika thought, but quickly shrugged aside the thought, I have a job to do, no time for fun.

When Ashley came out of her bedroom, a replica of the late twentieth century, she was dressed in her Starfleet civilian clothes. Erika felt a twang of guilt at being dressed so inappropriately while on call, while her friend that had practically resigned, was dressed in a nice outfit that was fit for the times, not resembling mid-twenty-first century gangs attire.

"I have an outfit that I think would fit you," Ashley said realizing Steinvorth's predicament, and feeling a bit of guilt herself. Her friend was going to have a "relaxing" night on the town, but decided to stop in at the nick of time to talk to her. And now she was being forced back to duty.

"Thanks," Erika said relieved, she had enough dignity to go in front of an admiral, let alone Mienuea, dressed like an Orion slave girl.

Ashley went into her bedroom and came back with a jumpsuit Erika hadn't seen for years, "You still have that?" She said mystified that her friend still kept the suit she used to wear so often. It was tight, it had black arms and legs and a red torso, very tight, but still quite appropriate for Spacedock. Starfleet had had much worse back in the twenty-third century, the miniskirts were the length that Erika often wore now. "I can't believe it! Do you remember the heads I used to turn with this thing?" She said excitedly.

Ashley smiled, very well remembering being with a friend who caused whiplash to become one of the most common injuries to male Starfleet cadets. "Oh, I remember. You didn't just turn head with it either. I remember you convincing me to go with you when you would walk up and get their comm. channel numbers and get out of there while they sat and stared to dazed for independent thought. I don't think," Ashley said, "they ever knew what hit them."

"Oh, they knew, later when I gave them a call that is. That night, then they didn't know what hit them," Erika got a grin on her face again, "And sometimes the next morning too."

"I remember. I was in the bed two meters away half the time," Ashley said laughing. The academy days were pretty serious, but still wild times. Just the thought of those days pulled Ashley more and more out of her haze. She was beginning to forget why she decided not to go back to duty when she was called. The pain was still there, a shadow across her mind, but she could cope with it now. It would not hinder her fight for what was right. She had pretty much abandoned the war. Abandoned her friends. Let them handle the problems of the galaxy, when she had sworn to protect the people, and devote herself to exploration. Now she was going to repay her debt, whatever it was Starfleet wanted, she would do it for them.

When Erika came out she looked even more stunning than she had back in the academy. The outfit triggered something in Johnson's mind that she couldn't place. It felt important somehow, but she couldn't for her life think of why. That was, until Erika placed her comm. badge on her chest.

Oh my god! The uniform! It's, it's what I saw! Ashley realized. But she didn't say anything, for what could she say? 'Guess what Erika, I saw the future and we were wearing your pickup outfits.' No, it wouldn't go over to well. Especially when she looked down at the half-full bottle of liquor on her coffee table. No, she would have to tell her some other time. When she wasn't half drunk. And she did feel kind of drunk anyway. Maybe it was all made up. Well, at least she was sober enough to keep her wits, this wasn't going to turn out regrettably, Ashley would make sure of that.

"Well, I think we're ready to go," Steinvorth said, then tapping the comm. badge, "Spacedock, two to beam up," And Johnson left the sanctuary for the first time in four months.

Chapter II

Ashley had forgotten how good it felt to be around Starfleet officers. That was the first thing she noticed when she materialized on the transporter pad, the lonely feeling was gone. What she felt now was energy. Energy of body and mind. She had not felt it since

before the battle, but now it was back.

Automatically Johnson nodded her thanks and said, "Cadet," like she was accustomed to since she became the commanding officer on the Lenin. But the Cadet just gave her a quizzical look, probably wondering what a civilian was doing talking to him like a commanding officer, though she didn't blame him, she felt a little hurt.

Erika just smiled, and started walking out of the transporter pad. The look the cadet got when she walked past was enough payment for the trip, and then some. This was going to be a lot of fun, if it wasn't for the reason of the journey.

Ashley hadn't been on spacedock for nearly five months, but it was still quite familiar for her. The corridors she trained in as a cadet were the exact same ones that all of the great captain's had walked in at one point, Kirk, Sulu, Picard, Pike, and many others, it was partially nostalgic and partially the fun of seeing men's looks when Erika walked by. Some of the personnel remembered the outfit, it was probably pretty hazy, because they were probably so drunk at the time it was a blur. But Ashley hadn't forgotten. None of their old quad had ever forgotten watching Erika walk into her room, with a guy tailing not far behind. For a brief moment she thought about their old quad, what had happened to her friends and colleagues.

"Ashley, what are you staring at?" Erika said snapping her out of the daze. She was sitting at the door to the admiral's office, and she looked like she was trying to burn holes in the walls with her stares.

"Nothing of particular interest. Just thinking, wondering about what happened to our old quad from the freshman year," Ashley told her. "I was wondering how many of them have survived this war, how many of our friends have died since I left."

"I have wondered that many times before," Erika said reflectively. "Well, enough time wasted. Admiral Mienuea is waiting for us I'm sure."

Erika pushed the tone and then a few moments later the door slid open.

"Ah, good commander, I was so hoping you would join us. We had thought it would take a couple more days to get you out of your home and back to Starfleet. Many of your friends have requested that you get this assignment. And after carefully looking at your records, and my own experiences show that this will be the perfect posting for someone as talented and resourceful as you," the admiral praised.

"You flatter me Admiral," Johnson said, "but I know not of this assignment. Do you think you could fill me in on what you are talking about?" She said with a little more attitude than she had meant for.

"Oh, of course. You haven't been in the loop for so long, I sometimes forget that when I see records like yours. The battles you won, the countless times you put your own life on the line for your crew, you were as good as any commanding officer ever has been. When I see information that tells me this, it is hard to imagine you have been

out of active duty for half a year," the admiral apologized.

"Do not praise my battles, I lost my ship. I let three ships sneak up on us, and then, I lose my wits. That is not a thing for praise Admiral," Johnson said fighting the anger that she was putting there. She wanted to be totally responsible for the incident. The only one to blame.

"Commander, your ship was performing diagnostics, you were far inside federation space. It was not carelessness. And it was not your fault. Nearly anyone else would have perished under three Dominion ships. I doubt the Enterprise could have done much better. You do not give yourself due credit," She said compassionately. This was not what Ashley was expecting. Mienuea was known to be tough as nails and not one to listen to excuses, but Ashley wondered if she had not made it to be that way on purpose, to shock people. Mienuea was trained as a counselor, and probably watched the reactions of others carefully. To give her an advantage, she thought to herself.

"Please, I would just like to know what you want me to do, I do not feel right standing here in these _clothes_ while addressing an admiral. So please just tell me what you need," Ashley said starting to wonder why she didn't just bring her uniform. She felt like accepting whatever a Starfleet officer had to say without a second thought, maybe it was nostalgia, but she had no inhibitions around her former self's life. And maybe it wasn't former any longer, maybe she was returning to the person she once was, maybe better for all of the experiences of the last months. It would be a welcome change.

The admiral nodded, then rose from her chair, "Commander, because of the loss of your ship, you no longer have a command," she said stating the obvious. She walked over to a viewer built into the wall and pressed a few buttons. "So, as of now, you shall be in command of this," she said pushing one more button.

Instantly a ship's blueprints appeared on the screen. It was long, with warp nacelles tapered to the side. It was indistinguishable from a Sovereign class ship from a side view, but it was nowhere the size. The specs showed it to be 400 meters long, and 12 decks thick. It had six phaser banks and three quantum torpedo launchers. The ship was like none Ashley had seen before, with a strange apparatus in the front of the saucer section. It looked like a projector of some kind.

"What is it? I've never seen anything like it," Johnson said amazed. It looked as powerful as a Sovereign class ship, and about twice the speed. How could they be giving the command to _her_?

"This is a new design they've been working on at the Utopia yards. It's officially called the LX753, but that is just a official title, it is a Warrior class vessel, a warship as well as a full function science ship. It's only got a crew compliment of 200, but that is for speed reasons, and the fact that the mission we will be sending them on also influences crew size," The admiral explained.

"And what mission is that?" Johnson asked weary of the answer, who knew what kind of horrible mission Starfleet headquarters could dream up if they were really motivated.

"I can tell you no more than, it will be of risk, to you, and the crew, but we are all at risk. With the dominion war, a war in which we may lose, almost anything goes. But if we don't accept the fact that we must bend our own rules, we will not survive. I must have your oath," she said almost smiling, but with a hard expression, "and if you give me it, nothing we say in this meeting can go beyond this room. Only under my orders are you to reveal it."

Ashley's mind was in turmoil. How could she be made to decide this now_. Because your ready_, she thought after a moment of deep thought. She was ready for anything that Starfleet could throw at her, whether cadet ship or dominion, to isolation for a month for testing. She was Commander Ashley Johnson of the United Federation of Planets.

"Yes, Admiral, I am ready. I accept your command, and promise that you will not be disappointed," Ashley almost saluted like a twentieth century military cadet, like she had been in the holo-programs she used to use religiously while a junior officer on the Capricorn. This was exciting and she knew she could do it. That meant something was either very right, or she had drunken too much coffee. "Now what is it you want me to do?"

"Espionage," Mienuea said dryly. "I want to remind you, this is an off the record conversation, if the information said here gets out, it may cost many, many lives," the admiral said with all due seriousness. Now Johnson realized why the Mienuea was known as such a banshee, when it was time to be completely serious, she was exactly that, serious, hard, terrifying. "This ship, the product of years of Starfleet and Trill research. We call it the Kahn maneuverable, for the scientist that created the first prototype of the experiment," she said.

"You mean the Trill scientist that created the first federation artificial wormhole...?" Ashley thought aloud. She was beginning to get an idea of what was taking place here.

"Yes, Kahn was able to create a wormhole, only open for a few seconds, but still, a wormhole-" the admiral said, giving Johnson the realization.

"The projector on the saucer section!" Johnson almost yelled, surprised at what was going on, something she hadn't known the technology existed for, "The projector, it works like a magnified deflector dish! It creates wormholes? I didn't think we had that kind of technology!" she exclaimed.

Erika didn't look too surprised, _she must have known,_ Ashley thought. This was probably planned days, if not weeks ago, and she had been chosen to be the star of the show already. She began to get more than a little angry, _they could have at least told me what they were planning before,_ but she soon realized it was how she had been acting that had given them the chance to do this. If she had shaped up and quit acting like a child. _Who knows, they could've drafted me,_ she thought, though that hadn't happened in over one-hundred years. But, luckily, she had accepted before they took the extreme measures.

"You are correct commander. Starfleet has been working on this technology nearly nonstop since it was created. It was realized how

valuable it could be for Starfleet Tactical. And after years of research this is the end result. One of the most powerful ships in the fleet," Mienuea said decisively.

"And you're giving that to _me?_" Ashley was still reeling from the many shocks of the evening. But that was the hardest fact to believe. That they could be giving her the command of a powerful new warship.

"Yes commander. You, are the new commanding officer of the yet to be named starship. You shall carry as much responsibility with you as a captain of a Flagship. And I know you are ready. But do you know you are ready?" Mienuea asked Ashley with a serious tone again.

Ashley nodded thoughtfully. She wasn't sure at first, but now, the more she thought about it, she knew she could take the responsibility. If she had done it before, she could do it again. And this time she would do better than before. The experience of loss was firmly implanted in her mind, and it would not get in the way again. She was one of Starfleet's finest, and she would act like it.

"Yes sir!" she said and this time she did salute. Mienuea smiled and then Erika saluted too.

"Good commander. Command will be happy to hear that you have accepted," Mienuea was smiling with delight. Ashley guessed a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. And she probably had wanted Johnson to completely commit herself to the assignment, and had been happy to hear her answer.

"Thank you," Ashley said beaming herself. She was back into Starfleet, she was worth something again.

"Now, I have something to give you commander," Mienuea said reaching into her desk.

"You can't be serious," Ashley said as the admiral brought a small black box out of the desk.

"Yes, _Captain, _I am."

Chapter III

If anyone had asked what he was doing, Romero probably would have told them to go to hell. But, unfortunately for him, they wouldn't have to look very hard to explain what he was doing. There weren't many people stupid enough to try to climb Olympus Mons on Mars by themselves. In fact, in the over two-hundred years that Mars had been colonized, no one had _ever _climbed Olympus Mons alone.

Olympus Mons is 27 kilometers high, three times the height of earth's highest peak, Mt. Everest. And it was a climb that took days, if not weeks, to climb in it's entirety. And that was crazy, insane, and idiocy. But if Tyson Romero ever minded being called all of those things, he had never shown it yet. He had done all of the most intense and dangerous things in the quadrant. Stupid, ludicrous, and impossible things that anyone in their right mind would steer clear of. But that was what thrilled Romero the most. The thought that he was the only one doing it. And he was right, he was the only one.

He had been climbing for over a week. He had only things able to fit into his pack, a waterproof suit, high carbohydrate dehydrated food, plenty of water, but he was running out. He didn't know exactly how far he had to go, he didn't bring a tricorder. But he knew he was close. Using modern technology he was able to climb quickly and easily. And on the chimney he was at now, he didn't even need it.

Using one hand then another he grasped the porous rock and pulled himself higher, the oxygen was getting thin, and he had to take a breathe from his adapter. When he did that he noticed a ledge above him just a few meters. He could rest there and set up camp for the night.

Once at the ledge, he took out his water. He had about two liters left, so if he didn't get up soon he would have to activate the emergency beacon to his shuttle before he got to the top. If that happened, weeks of effort and planing would be wasted. He would have to get to the top soon.

As he sipped his water, he looked down at the surface. The buildings in the colony looked like small pebbles to the naked eye. A large shuttle lifted off and caught his attention. Soon it was at his level, which happened to be extremely high. With his eyes, he followed the ship into orbit. And when he began to look back down he noticed something he hadn't seen before. The peak! The peak was about twenty meters above him with a mild climb to get to it. He could get there by nightfall and be back in his ship within hours. He could be eating a hot meal out of the replicator for the first time since he had camped out at the base of the mountain taking reconasance two weeks ago.

He shoved his things back into his pack quickly and began the climb. He wasn't too worried about a fall, to preoccupied with the thought of being off the damn mountain. That was a mistake could be fatal.

The climb was simple, one hand above the other, find a hand hold and pull yourself up, and it wasn't a angle that really worried Romero. He reached the last obstacle facing him before the peak, and was. All he heard was the cracking of rock and then the sound of oblivion as he began to fall towards the red blot below him that was Mars.

In the few moments he thought of earth religion. He wondered if there was a "god" that controlled everything and saved people that were good and punished the evil ones.

But he didn't have long to think, because milliseconds later he felt a pair of very strong hands grab his climbing jumpsuit. He was so dazed he hardly realized what was happening. He might have been dead already, and this was his afterlife for all he knew.

He looked up to see a woman that didn't look like she could actually be holding him up. She was not tall or very muscular looking, only about one and a half meters tall, but she had to be strong because he weighed sixty kilograms.

"What are you waiting for? I can't pull you up by myself. Climb!" The woman screamed at him. That brought Romero out of his daze.

"Who the hell are you?" Was his first question, he didn't like owing anyone debts, especially for saving his life. He would never work it off. "I want to know why your on this peak, and why you interrupted my fall," Romero said thinking of the rush he would have gotten before he splattered on the ground below.

"Shut the hell up and climb! This is no time for a discussion!" The woman said with a comfortable controlling tone in her voice. Romero knew she was someone with authority, and he hoped she wasn't Starfleet. But when he looked with closer detail, the Starfleet issue vest worn under a captain's uniform told all.

He grabbed hold of the mountain and began to pull himself up. Since he hadn't fallen more than a meter he didn't have far to go until he made it to the peak gasping for breathe. He took out his container of water, drank another liter, and offered the rest to the woman. She accepted and drained the last liter from the large jug.

"So," Romero said as the got their breaths back, "what is a Starfleet captain doing on top of this mountain. I know you must have been transported here, because I would have noticed you if you were climbing on this thing. Their is only one passable route, up the north ridge, and you were nowhere near it."

The woman smiled, "You're not much for greetings, are you? Well, I'll have to get us aquatinted. I am Captain Ashley Johnson, and you are Lieutenant-Commander Tyson Romero."

"Interesting Captain, you know so much about me and yet I know nothing about you. Why don't you fill me in on why you are here and who sent you?" Romero said curtly.

"Your not much for beating around the bush, are you? What you said about climbing, I wish I had the chance, and the time, to do it again, but unfortunately you are right, I did beam in. I was transported in about twenty minutes ago. I was here waiting and I noticed a few things about your technique. You lean in to much on the 40 degree inclines, it puts too much weight on your left arm," the Captain said sure of herself.

"What? What do you know about mountaineering?" Romero asked discounting Johnson's claim of any knowledge about climbing for simple research and a lucky guess. What could the small woman know about mountaineering skill?

"Tell me Tyson- do you mind if I call you Tyson?" Romero nodded his acceptance and Johnson continued, "do you remember the cadet excursion of Olympus Mons in 2365?" she asked.

"Yeah, I was a junior then..." He trailed of for a second then responded nearly enthusiastically, "Wait a second- Ashley Johnson-, the excursion team leader? You are the excursion team leader?" He said in awe. "You are a little... small. Don't you think?"

The captain laughed, "You'd be amazed how many people have said that same thing. Back when I was a cadet I received quite a bit of nonsense from the other climbers when I joined, but they soon learned it was not smart to stand in the way of Cadet Johnson when it came to mountaineering. I wondered why you never joined during your academy days, I was quite surprised when I looked at your file," Johnson had

an air of... maturity, that Romero found strange for someone so young. The captain was two years his junior, but Romero found a authoritative air about her that was astounding. A maturity that could only come from a tough childhood, which Romero knew wasn't true, because he had read up on all of the members of the expedition of Olympus Mons, and knew that Johnson grew up on earth, in a third generation Starfleet family, so it had to be something else. A great personal loss, that was what Romero was betting on, and in all likelihood it had something to do with this damn Dominion war.

"Ah, so you did do some research, I thought so. But then, there are not many Delec in this sector, especially not ones climbing the system's highest mountain, so I shouldn't have been too hard to find," Romero said smugly, not giving too much credit to Starfleet ingenuity, which he had once been part.

"Really, well, I would have to agree with you, there aren't many Delec in this sector. You were not very difficult to find, to say the least. Though, I do not believe that is the hard part. Since you asked so... kindly, I shall tell you why I've come," She said purposefully.

"Really Captain, must you have such sarcasm," Romero said dryly, meant to make the captain know the kind of person she was talking to.

Johnson fought the urge to retort, and decided on the method of delivering the question. After mere moments, she started, "Mr. Romero, have you ever thought of returning to Starfleet in active duty?"

Romero suppressed a laugh, but snorted anyway. "Captain, are you serious? I mean, come on. Me, rejoin Starfleet? I stormed out of Nichayev's office leaving behind me a trail of insults and threats, and that was years ago, when you tried to pit me against my one time colleagues, calling them the enemy, the Maquis. That, I was against with all my heart, that 'conflict'. Why would I want to join another, more terrible war?"

Johnson sighed. She had asked herself the same question many times in the last months, but had come to realize, and see the big picture much more clearly. If they didn't fight for their people, they wouldn't have a people to call their own. That was why the news was so hard to give to Romero. "I am sorry to have to tell you this now, Commander, but two months ago a Dominion fleet arrived at your homeworld," Johnson stopped at the look of pure horror on Romero's face.

"No, no! They're pacifists, not fighters, they couldn't possibly," The captain listened but continued.

"They arrived with Fourteen battle cruisers, and twenty fighters. They bombarded several of the cities the cities with torpedoes, until a surrender could be agreed upon. The planet is Dominion territory now. The largest moon is being used as a shipbuilding facility, and the others have breeding and weapons labs on them. They are using the Delec men as slave-laborers. I am sorry," She said feeling the terrible pain of her words hit him like phaser blasts.

"No, I can't believe they would be, that can't be," He muttered. She

let him grieve for a few minutes and he finally looked up at her again, "Which cities?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Which were the cities they destroyed?" He said, a cold, harsh tone to his voice.

"I.. I am not exactly sure. Exter, Desen, Reese. Those are a few of the names that have not been confirmed, but in all likelihood the information is correct," She said giving the information a moment to sink in.

"Desen is the worlds largest city. It had thirteen million people living there. Exter was the center of trade. Reese, my family lives in Reese," His choked sobs racked her heart like arrows of pain in her chest. She hadn't wanted him to find out that way, to hear of his planet's imprisonment and family's death by her. She had hoped it would be from one of his few living family members, or at least, a Deleceen Ambassador to the federation.

"I am sorry. I really am," She said, content let him stare at the rockface and contemplate for as long as he needed.

He sobbed and cried, his tears and words for his younger siblings, the ones he had met few times, but had always intended to visit, but never got around too, and his parents, how they were so against fighting. How could the Dominion do something like it, he wanted to know.

When nearly a half an hour had gone by, Romero looked up again with the same uncaring eyes Johnson had seen when she saved his life. His look of sorrow was gone. Only the small fires of hatred burned inside of him. He now had the unquenchable need for revenge in his heart, but he would fight and conceal it, as he heritage called for.

"My mourning period is over Captain. Now, if you can possibly refrain from sarcasm, you can ask me the question you can't wait to spring up and act all holier than though while reciting it to me," He said not perturbed by the news he had just learned of.

Johnson blinked in surprise. Partly for the fact that the sorrow was so fast gone from his face, and for the rest at his cutting remark. To her knowledge, she had been, decent, to him, and definitely not sarcastic enough to warrant the kind of treatment she was receiving. How dare he-, but then she realized what was going through his mind. The same such setting of her leaving Starfleet, the death of her lover and soulmate, had happened to him, only in a much larger scale. Though he had a much different way of dealing with his silent pain. Johnson had looked for answers in her own alcohol induced fantasies, and nearly killing herself. While Romero, he came from a species of nearly Vulcan-like abilities to conceal their emotions, but his anger and sorrow needed a receptacle, and she was the easiest for him to take his anger out upon, a stranger coming to intrude upon him, while he was minding his own business. The nearly perfect excuse.

"Tyson, Commander, I want you to understand this. I know what you are going through, and I also know that it will not help to ship yourself to some goddamned planet in the far reaches of the quadrant to hide from your pain. I know a way to help. We need you at Starfleet.

Starfleet needs your talents and abilities. We-" Johnson said starting the speech she had hoped to get Romero to change his mind, but was cut off by him rising to his feet and looking about to strike her. But he wasn't going to strike, his heritage had forbidden that, he had to combat it with words, not actions.

"Captain, how dare you tell me you know how I feel. You have no right to say you know what it feels like to lose your family! I had fourteen brothers and sisters, all living in Reese, and now they are dead! I will never see them again in the living! My eldest sister was nearing the age of maturity. She would soon be married and begin her family, and now that is all never going to happen!" He said passionately, again surprising Johnson. Lieutenant Tyson Romero was a man of many strange moods. He would be uncaring and impassionate at one moment, and in a rage the next.

She felt her own rage. His continued abuse of her, and then saying she could not possibly know the feeling of a loved one's death. He had no right.

She felt herself ready to scream at him, but stopped herself when remembering her mission. He was not someone to be angered by, but to negotiate a return to Starfleet. She could not jeopardize that because of her emotions. With calm resolution, she started, "I know you are greatly pained at this, but the fact is, we need your help. Starfleet can match the Dominion, build more ships and weapons, but we don't have the good people to fill them. More and more people are being recruited not as Starfleet career officers, but as temporaries only meant to stay as long as the war keeps going. We need good people, and for what I have to offer, we especially need you," She said with the same calm disposition she had when she beamed onto the rock.

Romero was outraged. She was an arrogant, pompous, irritating Starfleet captain and she was driving him mad. And the worst of all, he didn't even know what he hated most, the fact that she remained calm and disposed, or the fact that he was beginning to agree with her. He finally gave in to see what she was talking about.

"What is it you need me for Captain?" He asked after a moment of silence, his voice of suffering to give way, at letting his pride be taken away by giving into this woman.

"I need you to accompany me to Deep Space 3, where we will rendezvous with another group, and from there we will head to classified coordinates, where my ship is located," Johnson told him casually, trying not to let him suspect how the situation really was, but he missed nothing.

"Classified? What have I gotten myself into?" He asked.

"You'll see when we get there," she said, then tapped her commbadge, "Johnson to runabout Wolfgang, two to beam up," and they were whisked of the planet in a flurry of energy.

End
file.